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ASIATIC ART
Indian Sculpture: General

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

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SECRETARY

INDIAN SCULPTURE

Indian sculptures are almost exclusively religious in theme and application: they include (1) cult images, whether those of the main shrine (usually in stone), or those used in processions (usually in metal), and (2) reliefs, originally parts of the architecture of the shrines, representing deities or decorative themes with or without specific symbolic significance. Broadly speaking every detail has, or once had, a definite meaning. Stone images range in date from the third century B.C. up to the present day; some in terra-cotta are older.

Indian religious imagery is probably of indigenous rather than of Aryan origin. The whole conception of a cult with its office (pūjā) and images (mūrti, pratimā) is alien to Vedic Brāhmanism with its sacrificial ritual (yajña); and even more so to the philosophy of the Upaniṣads and the psychology of early Buddhism and Jainism, which call for personal insight, effort, and discipline, practised outside and even at the expense of the social order. But at the same time, the devotional (bhakti) worship of gods as persons, represented by symbols or images set up in shrines, seems to have been characteristic of the indigenous non-Aryan bulk of the population, attached to the routine of daily life; and these

cults of local deities may well have descended from a millenial antiquity.

By the fifth century B.C. the outlines of these broad distinctions had been greatly modified; the Aryan invaders had already become Indians, profoundly influenced by their environment, materially and psychologically. The non-Aryan masses, on the other hand, had been (already in the North and later in the South) at once superficially and indelibly Aryanised; that is to say they had come to speak an Aryan dialect (Prākrit), and to accept with some reservations the divinity of Brāhmans, but continued (whatever their more orthodox sectarian affiliations might be) to worship in their own way local and tutelary divinities such as Yakṣas (genii) and Nāgas (dragons), and goddesses of prosperity, fertility, or disease. A partial mixing of blood by metissage must also be taken into account.

The resulting religious culture known to us as Hinduism (which, as far as cult and iconography are concerned may be taken as including Buddhism and Jainism) is a fusion-product of the conditions outlined above. Fundamentally of popular origin, its ultimate sanctions are to be found in Brāhmanical philosophy, and its systematic organisation is the work of professional theologians. As a religion it is a worship of God in innumerable forms; innumerable,

(1) because each, according to the genius of Hinduism, is acceptable as a form rather than as the form of the deity, (2) because the varieties of human experience demand a variety of resort, and (3) because, in historical fact, innumerable deities, local or tribal, originally distinct, have been incorporated into a common pantheon as aspects or incarnations of a supreme deity. As a philosophy, Hinduism teaches the sole existence of a Supreme Reality, transcending all forms, even those of gods, which are in fact no more than temporal creations of humanity imagined and determined according to the limitations and needs of humanity.

The orthodox conception of devotional religion thus evolved is summarised with supreme genius in the most popular of all Indian scriptures, the Bhagavad Gītā,* - the one book with which the student of India, even the student of Indian art if he confines himself to a single book, should familiarise himself. Here we find the religious philosophy of Indian society, not that of any particular ascetic order. The teaching is that spiritual freedom (mokṣa, nirvāṇa, the summum bonum, here conceived in terms of union with the Supreme Being) is best attained through a selfless devotion to the fulfilment of func-

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*Best translations by Barnett (London); and by Besant and Bhagavan Das (Adyar). These can be consulted in the Museum Library.

tion (dharma), and by loving devotion to the deity, under whatsoever form he may be worshipped.

In this religious world the ritual -- typically the offering of prayers, flowers, lights, incense, music -- and the image itself regarded as a focal point of thought directed toward the deity, are means (sädhanä) of approach and attainment, no more and no less. In other words, Hindu sculpture has never been regarded in the modern sense of the word as "Art." It was not a product of personal imaginings and sensibilities, but of skilled craftsmanship applied to set problems, just as in mediaeval Christian art all its problems were presented to the sculptor by the Church. It was not for him to create, but to realize the prescribed types; and to this end we find the types clearly described in the craftsmen's handbooks (Silpa Sästras), which serve the modern student as manuals of iconography. The craftsmen had to visualize these descriptions in Yoga, and from this mental image to actualize the form in wood or stone or metal as the case might be. Thus, the plastic elements available are used as a language for the expression of spiritual ideas and feelings. Needless to say, in the language of Art there is no inherent necessity of conformity to the visual appearances of the world; the only necessity is for clarity of statement, and this will depend upon the inner con-

sistency of the whole, not upon the resemblance of parts to things seen. For example, four-armed images are no more than a winged Grecian Nike to be dismissed as monstrosities; they represent iconographic problems, and as theme are amenable only to theological, not to aesthetic, criticism. Every work has to be judged on its own merits, not as theme, but as realization.

From what has been said above as to the purpose intended to be served by Indian sculptures, it will be realised that their original value depended primarily upon hieratic justification and on sanctity, not on their relative aesthetic merit. The Indian sculptor well understood the difference between skill and lack of skill, but our modern use of the terms good and bad, as applied to works of art, would have been incomprehensible to him. At the same time the most casual observer will recognize that Indian sculptures, like those of other countries, vary greatly in aesthetic virtue, and that in divers works dealing with one and the same theme a very different content may be expressed. If the sculptures are considered without reference to historic sequence and geographical relationship, these variations will appear both arbitrary and confusing, and are likely to be attributed to the individual peculiarities of different "artists," with which they have very little, in

fact, to do. Studied historically and geographically, on the other hand, it will be found that all the works of any one period and place are very much alike in degree and quality of virtue. The varying content (more or less emotional, for example) and aesthetic merit (greater or less vitality and consciousness) are thus seen to be characteristic of particular periods and ethnic environments. These secular and regional variations were certainly not intentional or conscious, they were merely inevitable.

In other words we find in Indian art and its branches the same great cycle, and sub-cycles, that are characteristic of other artistic cycles. There is a primitive creative period characterised by reserve and power together with a certain awkwardness; a time of flowering in which accomplishment is adequate to all demands of the creative imagination, and in which the earlier plastic amplitude is rendered with freer movement, grace, and charm; a period of gradual attenuation, in which the formulae, created with so much energy, are no longer felt, and when conscious graces and subtleties of craftsmanship have become ends in themselves; a rococo period of greatest intricacy in which form is overwhelmed by ornament; and finally a growing carelessness. The latest phase only, that of a pseudo-return to Nature (secularisation, realism, anecdote) is not represent-

ed in India. These unconscious stylistic sequences are not merely of artistic interest, for life and art are here inseparable; they correspond to like crises in the religious, political, and social history of the race.

Indian sculptures may be classified according to period as follows:

Mauryan, pre-Mauryan, Sunga, Scytho-Parthian, Early Andhra, and Kuṣāna, up to the close of the second century A.D. Represented in the collections by early terra-cottas and a few reliefs.

Late Andhra and Gupta, end of the second century A.D. up to about A.D. 600. Represented in the collections by numerous examples, mainly from Amaravatī and Mathurā.

Early mediaeval, about A.D. 600-1200. Represented by numerous examples.

Late mediaeval. Represented mainly by the metal images (Naṭarāja, etc.) from Southern India.

Geographically, the Greco-Buddhist school of Gandhāra, on the northwest Indian frontier, contemporary with Kuṣāna sculpture should be noted; and of greater artistic interest, the prolongations and developments of Indian art, revitalised by the energies of younger cultures, in Farther India (Burma,

Siam, Cambodia) and Indonesia (Sumatra, Java, and Bali). These Farther Indian and Indonesian arts have broadly speaking two phases or periods: one, up to about A.D. 700, closely related to Indian Gupta and Pallava art; the other, from about the eighth to the fourteenth century, a classic period, in which the native elements become increasingly apparent, and followed by a decline. Throughout the whole area under discussion a vigorous and admirable folk art (crafts) has survived almost to the present day, and the traditions of architecture have survived locally; here and there, for example amongst the metal founders of Southern India, a surprising technical accomplishment can still be discovered even in sculpture.